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Written on FEBRUARY 11, 2015 AT 8:00 AM by SVANDERWERFF

Ten Curious Facts about Navy Medicine’s Presidential History

Filed under MILITARY MEDICINE, NAVY HISTORY, U.S. NAVY [NO COMMENTS]



The game was held at 7:15 every morning, regardless of weather, and open to President Hoover’s advisers and associates. Newspapers started taking notice of this early bird ritual and began calling its participants “The Medicine Ball Cabinet.”

By André B. Sobocinski, Historian, BUMED

In August 1823, President James Monroe was seized with an acute illness (1).Navy Surgeon Bailey Washington (1784?-1854), ton duty at the nearby dispensary, was called to attend to the nation’s chief executive.



Dr. Washington, a distant relative of our first commander in chief, was one of the first military physicians to actually treat a sitting president, but was far from the last. From President Monroe through Obama, Navy medical personnel have played an integral role in developing the very concept of the White House Medical Unit (WHMU) and defining the field of “Chief Executive Medicine.” This President’s Day offers us an ample opportunity for us to look back at a few of the points where Navy Medicine’s history intersects with that of the White House.

10. First White House Physician on

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Dr. Bailey Washington, a distant relative of our first commander in chief, was one of the first military physicians to actually treat a sitting president.

film? Navy surgeon [Presley Rixey\(1852-1928\)](#) has the distinction of being a primary physician for Presidents [William McKinley](#) and later [Theodore Roosevelt](#). He was with [McKinley](#) when he was shot at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, N.Y., September 1901 and later published a medical report of the incident,

Medical and Surgical Report of the Case of the Late President of the United States (1901). In happier times he may also hold the curious distinction of the first presidential physician, and possibly the first Navy medical officer, to appear on film. In 1899, [Dr. Rixey](#) co-starred in “President McKinley” by the American Mutoscope Company. The short film shows the President and Ida McKinley walking with [Dr. Rixey](#) at the the Holyoke, Mass observatory. No plot twists here, but then again this was released when such ditties as “The Big Sneeze,” “The Kiss,” and “Train Arriving at Station” could still catch the public’s imagination.

9. Presidential Dentists For many years the “White House Dentist” was selected from the National Naval Medical Center, later WRNMMC, in Bethesda, Maryland. The tradition began in 1923 when Navy dental surgeons Drs. Alfred Chandler, William Darnell, and Frances Ulan, attached to the Navy Dental School in Washington, D.C., were asked to attend to the dental needs of President Coolidge and the first family.

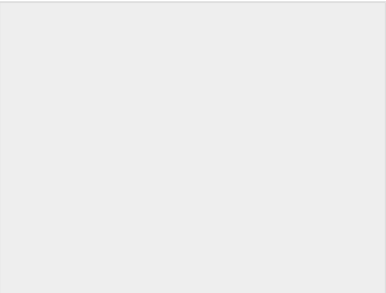
Rear Adm. Alfred Chandler (1890-1974) would go on to serve Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt as their dentist. In retirement, he was called upon to restore a set of President Washington’s “hippo-ivory” dentures in the Smithsonian American History Museum’s collection.



White House Dentist Rear Adm. Alfred Chandler restored a set of President Washington’s “hippo-ivory” dentures in the Smithsonian American History Museum’s collection.

8. First Military Nurses in the White House Although Navy nurses had accompanied presidents on their travels as far back as 1918, trained nurses were not an official part of the WHMU until 1950, albeit civilians. The first military nurses to serve in the WHMU were Navy nurses in the Kennedy Administration. Navy nurses Lt. Cmdr. Elizabeth Chapowicki, and Lt. Diane Lowther were among the first to hold this distinction.

7. First Physician to the White House Dr. Joel Boone (1889-1974) is a legendary figure in Navy Medicine. A Medal of Honor recipient noted for his heroics in France and Haiti, Boone is also credited for adapting helo-decks on Navy hospital ships, reforming health and sanitary conditions in U.S. coal-mines, and serving as the namesake of a Navy clinic in Little Creek, Virginia.



In the 1920s and 30s, Boone was seen by many as the consummate, and perceivable perennial, practitioner of White House medicine. He first earned his keep as the assistant White House physician to Presidents [Warren G. Harding](#) and [Calvin Coolidge](#), and then primary physician to [Herbert Hoover](#) (1929-1933). While in the [Hoover](#) administration Public Law No. 89-71, approved

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April 4, 1930, established the position and title of “Physician to the White House.” By law, Boone can be called the very first official Physician to the President.

6. A “Hoover Ball” is Born On March 10, 1929, six days after [Herbert Hoover's](#) inauguration, Lt. Cmdr. Joel Boone conducted a physical examination on the new president noting that the 54-year-old man’s health was good except that he suffered from dyspnea (Difficulty in breathing, often caused by heart or lung disease), carried too much *avoirdupois (Weight)* around the abdomen, and his pulse was not as strong as expected.

Boone outlined a special diet to keep the president’s weight down, and advised him on developing a regular exercise routine. Dr. Boone proceeded to plan the morning routine of a medicine ball toss. He marked out a rectangular court with tennis net on the south lawn of the White House, near the fountain. The game was held at 7:15 every morning, regardless of weather, and open to the president’s advisers and associates. Newspapers started taking notice of this early bird ritual and began calling its participants “The Medicine Ball Cabinet.” In his unpublished memoir, Boone recalled that “it was just passing the ball in a circle, one to the other. “Then, having been acquainted with deck tennis in my earlier days cruising long distances aboard ship... I conceived, in a limited space, using the medicine ball to play a modified game of tennis, as it were, . . . throwing it with our hands across the net, which was kept high.”

5. The National Hotel Disease When James Buchanan was elected president in 1856, he asked his fellow Lancastrian and political supporter, Navy [Surgeon Jonathan Foltz, \(1810-1877\)](#), to accompany him to Washington. [Foltz](#) would become the first military physician to attend to a sitting president on a full-time basis. In January, and later in March, 1857, [Foltz](#) treated the then President-elect during bouts of dysentery he suffered while staying as a guest at Washington, D.C.’s National Hotel.



Navy Surgeon Jonathan Foltz treated then President-elect during bouts of dysentery he suffered while staying as a guest at Washington, D.C.’s National Hotel.

Termed the “National Hotel Disease,” many medical historians now believe this condition was caused by an infectious agent through the contamination of the hotel’s food or water supply. [Foltz's](#) colorful career, including his tenure a presidential physician, was later the subject of a

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book by his grandson, *Surgeon of the Seas: the Adventurous Life of Surgeon General Jonathan M. Foltzin the Days of Wooden Ships* (1931).

4. Readiness according to Roosevelt Today's U.S. Navy espouses a "culture of fitness," and "Physical Readiness," but this was not always so. We have to thank then Surgeon General [Presley Rixey](#) and of course [Theodore Roosevelt](#) for this. In the early 1900s, many including the president himself were appalled by the lack of physical conditioning in the Navy. [Roosevelt](#) wrote, "Many of the older officers were so unfit physically that their condition would have excited laughter, had it not been so serious to think that they belonged to the military arm of the Government."



President Theodore Roosevelt charged his personal physician Presley Rixey to help develop a new Navy physical fitness regimen.

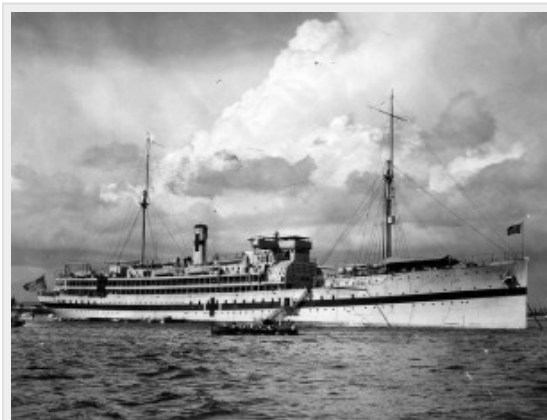
This discontent would lead to [Roosevelt](#) charging his personal physician Rixey to help develop a new physical fitness regimen.

Issued as General Order No. 6 in January 1909, the new test gave officers the choice of completing one of three options: a fifty mile walk within three consecutive days and in total of twenty hours; a ride on horseback at a distance of ninety miles within three consecutive days; or a ride on a bicycle at a distance of 100 miles within three consecutive days.

All personnel taking the test would be examined by a Navy Medical Board to determine whether the exam could be taken without risk and report again to the board upon completion. Officers would not be promoted unless they passed the exam and their medical record would now include a fitness report. The General Order was superseded by a less strenuous PRT in 1910.

3. Surgery on "Old Hickory" When Gen. [Andrew Jackson](#) was elected president he was the oldest man up to that point elected to office and his health issues were lengthy—dysentery, dropsy, malaria, smallpox, bullets embedded near his heart and left shoulder; and as a result, possibly lingering effects of lead poisoning. In January 1832, Navy [Surgeon Thomas Harris \(1784-1861\)](#)—a future Chief of BUMED and a noted professor of operative surgery—was called upon to extract the bullet from Jackson's shoulder. The bullet had been nestled in this spot since a duel Jackson fought with Jessie Benton in downtown Nashville, Tenn. in 1813. The surgery—performed without anesthesia—was a resounding success. As one would expect of "Old Hickory," [Jackson](#) would attend a White House ball the very evening of the operation.

2. How do you spell (USS) R-E-L-I-E-F? Navy [Surgeon Presley Rixey](#) believed that hospital ships should be the domain of Navy medical officers and as such Navy physicians should be granted the right to be commanding officer of both MTF and ship! [Theodore Roosevelt](#) agreed with his physician and confidante, and ordered that Navy physicians be given command of hospital ships.



In 1908, Navy [Surgeon Charles Francis Stokes](#) (of wire-basket stretcher fame) would take the helm of USS *Relief* on its cruise around the world.

President Theodore Roosevelt agreed with Navy Surgeon Presley Rixey that Navy physicians should be granted the right to command a hospital ship.

1. The “President’s Hospital” From his days as Assistant Secretary of the Navy to being president, [Franklin Roosevelt](#) could be called a Navy man. His personal physician, [Ross McIntire](#) was Navy, he collected Navy memorabilia, and during the selection of a new naval hospital site for the he took personal interest.



President Ronald Reagan leaving National Naval Medical Center Bethesda in 1985.

[Roosevelt](#) not only selected the location of the future National Naval Medical Center (NNMC) Bethesda, Maryland, he even conducted the preliminary design of the hospital and dedicated it on August 31, 1942. The NNNMC, later Water Reed National Military Medical Center, has provided medical care to every president since [Roosevelt](#) and even boasts its own presidential unit. From [Johnson’s](#) gallbladder removal to [Reagan’s](#) colon and skin cancer surgeries to the annual Chief Executive “check-ups” the hospital has truly lived up to its moniker, the “President’s Hospital.”

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